

County now runs business accelerators

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Collier County commissioners on Tuesday finalized the termination of a public-private partnership to operate the county's two business accelerators.

Commissioners ended the county's agreement with Economic Incubators Inc., the nonprofit tasked with operating the Naples and Immokalee accelerators since 2014. The county took over accelerator program operations July 1.

In April, commissioners voted to start the process of separating the nonprofit from the accelerator program following longstanding questions about how the organization spent its money, managed the program and delivered results.

The county's Office of Business & Economic Development staff manage the Naples Business Accelerator in North Naples. Two former Economic Incubators staff members are now county employees and operate the Florida Culinary Accelerator @ Immokalee.

Sean Callahan, the county's executive director of corporate business operations, said no operational changes were made. It's business as usual in the accelerators. Callahan said the county is in talks with Florida Gulf Coast University to develop a formal curriculum so businesses can improve their models, meet their goals and leave the

See ACCELERATORS, Page 8A

Accelerators

Continued from Page 3A

accelerators within specific time frames to operate successfully.

"That's the whole point of the accelerators," Callahan said.

In a white paper Economic Incubators Inc. presented to commissioners in April, the organization said the accelerators needed more formal, structured programming. The organization suggested conducting initial assessments of potential participants; formal entrepreneurship training courses; requirements for formal business plans, performance benchmarks and metrics; and monitoring of program participants' progress, among other practices.

The county's business development office plans to implement several of those measures, especially at the Naples accelerator. The Immokalee outfit has been open for about a year and a half and is still in the early stages of growth.

Future applicants will now have to meet strict requirements to participate in the Naples accelerator program.

"Right now it's operated more as a co-working space," Callahan said.

Companies in the accelerator will be required to track jobs created, investments and expenses for the economic

development office to track.

Jace Kentner, director of the Office of Business & Economic Development, said future participants in the accelerator will be screened more closely. Because of the scrutiny about the accelerator program's finances and operations, Kentner said the county may limit the types of companies coming in, especially to the Naples accelerator.

"I want to give as many companies a fair shake, but I also know we've got to focus on who we get the most success out of," he said. "We have to limit the scope of who we're helping and be more targeted."

That won't necessarily mean that businesses not meeting new requirements will be booted from the accelerators.

"If someone's trying to do good, and we have the space, I think they should utilize the space until we have to make a hard decision," Kentner said. "We haven't had to make that decision yet and, personally, I don't think we'll have to."

In addition to implementing new requirements for businesses, county staff will evaluate how to enhance services at the accelerators. Each company will be required to have a mentor. The accelerators partner with SCORE, a network of volunteer business mentors, to guide entrepreneurs.



Ahmed El, chef and culinary program manager, gives a tour of the Florida Culinary Accelerator @ Immokalee on June 13. "We have all the basics members need to get started," El said. MORGAN HORNSBY/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

The county will provide more business training, as well as networking and educational opportunities for entrepreneurs.

The purpose of the accelerators is to provide a place for new businesses to experiment and fail without fear of losing everything as they would in the real world. That said, Kentner wants the accelerators to help entrepreneurs arrive

at any potential failure quickly.

"I know failing quickly sounds terrible, but in business, it's a very humane thing," he said. "Get them in, get them the maximum amount of help, and if the business idea doesn't work, we have it not work quickly so we can change the focus ... so we're not wasting time and resources and we can help the most people we can."